

## - Greeting Card Fiasco

The more he looked at it, the more it needled at him. There was no reason that it should; the two of them had been going out for a little over six months already and there were no dark clouds on the horizon so far as he could see, but still, looking at their two names conjoined like that, it sent shivers running through his body.

The card itself was simple, sent from Mary's mother wishing them both a Merry Christmas and a *wonderful* New Year, as if, somehow, the promise of the new year was more important than the Christian façade of Christmas. Christmas was for kids, new year for the adults, perhaps that was what the woman thought. Either way, it was pretty redundant. Colin stared at the inscription, his eyes transfixed on the words scrawled in the top right hand corner.

To Mary and Colin.

Mary *and* Colin. Somehow, just seeing it like that, spelled out in ink, seemed to sum up what it was the two of them had. They were no longer seeing one another, they were no longer simply boyfriend and girlfriend; they were in a relationship. That meant a future together, house, kids, maybe marriage. It suddenly felt as if Colin's whole unmapped future had suddenly past right by his eyes, falling away from him, stripped of its surprise, kind of like the dull lull that exists on Christmas morning when you've finally finished unwrapping all your presents. It left him feeling hollow, empty of the promise of what life could bring. It was like buying a novel and then skipping to the last page to see how it all ends.

Mary and Colin. Their names didn't even go together. There was no poetry there, no alliteration. They seemed dead, boring even and that was soon all that he could think about.

He stood in the front room of the flat they rented together, holding the card in one hand while the other toyed nervously with his jeans' pocket. That was the thing of it all, they lived together, had been doing so for the last three weeks, deciding that if nothing else it would solve the problem of where they would go for Christmas. This way, they wouldn't have to choose between sets of parents, they could just spend it together, alone. That thought scared him now. Christmas alone in a new place, with a girl that it suddenly seemed like he had only known for a very short space of time.

But he was being ridiculous, wasn't he? Sure, it was always a bit of a shock the first time you saw your name lumped in with someone else's, but that was only natural; it was part of growing up, of getting involved seriously with someone else.

Colin looked at the stack of as yet unopened cards and shuddered at the thought of what they might contain. Seeing this written on a card from Mary's mother was one thing, but what if his own parents had done the same? He didn't think he would be able to cope with that. It would be like they had cut him off as a son, just throwing his name in with someone else's. He would no longer be special to them, no longer their precious son. He would be just another married man, a name on their Christmas card list, ready to be ticked off.

Colin placed the card down on the sideboard and tried taking some deep breaths. What the hell was he getting so worked up about, this was silly. But silly or not, he found that his heart was thundering in his chest. He had to get out; he needed some air.

Without even picking up a jacket, Colin marched from the front room, down the hall and stepped out of the front door, only pausing to collect his keys from the hook on the wall in a brief moment of clarity.

Outside, the world had delved into the deep pit of December, the cold seeming to be within everything; the air, the rushing wind, the icy grass. Everything was tainted with winter's touch and Colin's body instantly recoiled at its caress. But he couldn't go back inside now, not even just to fetch a jacket. His feet wanted to walk and he had to obey them; he felt too weak to fight.

He started down the steps and trotted out onto the street, a thin layer of snow crunching underfoot. There had been a slight flurry that morning, none since, but it had been enough to coat the ground in a white blanket that seemed to prosper in the freezing temperature.

Colin walked, his body moving along the still unfamiliar streets, but his eyes took in none of the details. The other pedestrians hurrying along through the cold, were lost on him, as were the numerous cars that crawled along, their drivers all gripped by the same sense of annoyed frustration at having to travel so slowly. He ambled along the streets, turning from one down to the next, taking no notice of where it was he was headed. His head was lost in thought, but it was the same, panicky thought that continuously rolled around his mind. His life was over, given up in sacrifice to another person, forever lost to him now, never to be reclaimed. Even if he were to break up with her, perhaps move out and go back to living with his parents, she would still stay with him, locked behind a flimsy door in his head, occasionally popping out at random moments to remind him of the life he had given away, the future that he had offered up. Why had he not thought about this more closely at the time. He had even been the one to suggest that they move in together, so why hadn't this fear raised up in him back then? Talk about bad timing; it was already too late, kind of like sitting down to get a football emblem tattooed on your forearm, to then decide that you actually supported another team entirely.

He rounded another corner, stepping down another street, the name of which went unnoticed. He had been walking for fifteen minutes or so, zigzagging his way along. He hadn't gone far enough to actually get lost but when this dominating thought eventually receded, it would take a while to gather his bearings.

Just then, as abruptly as he had started walking, Colin's feet brought him to a halt. He blinked his eyes as if opening them up after a particularly long sleep and turned to look around him. He was standing next to a house, more accurately, next to the back gate of a house. It was a thick, iron wrought kind, one that was old fashioned enough to be considered fashionable. In the middle of its elaborate swirling patterns, was hoisted a red and white sign that in plain terms warned any passerby to beware of the dog. The picture on the plaque showed the head of a particularly nasty looking Alsatian, but as Colin peered through the gate and into the backyard, he could see what looked more like a little terrier dog strutting about, sniffing at the drifts of snow in the corners of the patio, before lifting up its skinny leg and pissing a particularly vibrant stream of urine all over the white mound. The snow instantly began to dissolve under the assault, in a way it had failed to do under the direct stare of the bright, winter sun that hung high in the sky.

Colin watched the dog wander around the small garden, transfixed by the little creature; wondering if anyone else in the world had ever realised that dog was simply god spelled backwards. What was the significance in that, he wondered.

The dog stopped sniffing about and looked up, focusing on the gate. He cocked his head to the side as he curiously stared at the strange man beyond the gate. Colin stood still, returning the stare, his previous thoughts having vanished as his attention was grabbed by the ambling dog.

Without quite knowing why, Colin walked towards the gate and squatted down, stretching out his hand so that his fingers moved through the gap in one of the gate's designs. The dog stood staring a little longer and then trotted off, head bent down as his nose aimed for the wiggling digits.

The dog sniffed a little and then stuck out its tongue, the warm sensation of the rough tongue feeling good against Colin's frozen fingers. It was at this taste of warmth, that Colin realised quite how cold he really was. The dog seemed to sense the man's distress and increased the speed of his licking, as if its new aim in life was to keep this man from freezing to death.

They remained like that for a long time, Colin squatting with his hand outstretched while the little terrier licked away, eating up the cold.

"What the bloody hell do you think you're doing?" A voice boomed from behind Colin. "Get away from my dog!"

Colin turned, slowly, as if moving in a dream, to see a wiry, distressed woman standing on the doorstep of the house, her small, black eyes staring at him, her mouth agape.

"Oh, sorry," Colin stuttered and then backed away, the dog jumping up at the gate as he left, as if saying his own canine goodbye.

Colin risked one last look at the woman, he shot her another angry look, before he moved on down the street, resisting the urge to look back over his shoulder.

As he carried on with his aimless journey, he began to miss the dog, especially the warmth of the creature's tongue. It had felt good to have that kind of connection with another living being, to feel the touch of something else's warmth., especially in the bitter weather. But despite this, he still didn't like the thought of going back to Mary. She was at work at the moment, but she would be back just after lunch, her office closing at twelve given the holiday season. But wasn't she warm and giving and loving? Surely better than some mutt. But then the touch of the dog, its affection, had been unconditional. It hadn't needed the promise of a treat or even any kind of affection to be shown in return. Colin hadn't stroked the dog or even said a word to it, yet it had embraced him anyway, offering up its warmth. It wasn't like that with Mary. Other people's love needed to be maintained. They needed to be told nice things about them, they needed cuddling, kissing, fucking. They wanted gifts, cards, to let them know that they were loved and being thought about. A dog like that; he probably needed food and water and that would be enough. Mary needed those things too but if that was all that Colin had to offer her, then she would leave. Who could be satisfied in life with just food and water? Not when there was so much else out there to be bought, looked at, experienced.

A sadness welled within Colin then and he felt the urge to sit down; so he did, parking himself at the edge of the gutter, his feet resting on the sheet of black ice that lay

at the side of the road. He had gotten himself in too deep and now there was no way out, no escape hatch. How could it be, that on the basis of one, simple decision, your life could be permanently changed? Just by asking a girl to move in with you, not marriage, not kids, nothing that heavy, it had sealed his fate. How his life would have been different if he had decided to get a dog instead. Not only were dogs unconditional, but they were interchangeable, no matter how callous that might sound. If you got bored of a dog, you just sent him to a rescue home and then picked up another, simple. They didn't leave their mark on your heart like people did. Sure, you might always remember your dog, or recall your history together to other people, but they never imprinted directly on your heart, making it ache. They never made you feel guilty about wanting to spend some time alone, just to read or watch a movie. Once you entered into a relationship, that was it, it was symbiotic, everything had to be done together. Your friends became their friends, though not always vice versa. Everything was shared, split down your middle.

As Colin sat there, his arse freezing within a small tomb of snow, he felt like his very body had been cleaved in two. Even if he had decided to break up with Mary, to tell her that he just couldn't face a life where his future was already mapped out before he had even hit thirty, he couldn't do it now. It was three days before Christmas, the ultimate couple time next to Valentine's Day. Everyone would turn against him then. He would be labelled a heartless bastard, forever branded as being cruel and self centred. Even if these things turned out to be true, that didn't mean that you wanted everyone else to think of you in that way. That kind of thing needed to be kept a secret.

His hands reached down and started to play with his shoe laces, simply at a lack of anything better to do. There was a solution out there somewhere, there had to be? Every decision, no matter how serious, had to have a back out clause, some kind of loophole that could get you off the hook. But the more he sat and thought about it, the more hopeless Colin began to feel. So instead, he turned his thoughts back to the dog, thinking of the warmth of its tongue playing across his fingers, thawing out his skin, distracting his mind from the endless well of life that seemed to be opening up beneath him. He could see it before him now, a giant, black hole forming in the road, stretching on into oblivion, its sides decorated with flashing images of his future, of a bigger house, more Christmas cards and then presents addressed to the two of them in tandem; of hospital corridors filled with the strangling cries of new born babies, of rooms filled with toys, of grey hair and blankets draped across your knees.

And as he sat, looking down into this well, Colin could see no other option than to just jump in and let himself fall, the ghost of the dog's warmth still lingering on his fingers to keep him company.

Word Count: 2473